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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet provides an overview of rural schools, people, and labor markets to help vocational educators better understand the needs of rural Americans. It is based on "A Portrait of Rural America: Conditions Affecting Vocational Education Policy" (Rosenfeld 1981). Data is presented on population trends, poverty, employment patterns, employment opportunities, and rural schools. Implications for vocational education are drawn from the following facts: (1) the basic skill level of rural students tends to be lower; (2) farm jobs are declining, but there are a variety of agribusiness-related occupations for which curriculum is needed; (3) new industries are being attracted to rural areas; (4) many rural Americans are self-employed; (5) because of the small size and limited resources of rural schools, it is difficult to provide varied course offerings and special services; (6) parents strongly influence the career choices of their children; and (7) there is a strong need for postsecondary and adult vocational education programs. A bibliography is included which cites six resources, three of which are available from the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system. (DC)

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Vocational Education in Rural America.

OVERVIEW: ERIC Fact Sheet No. 15.

by

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ERIC OVERVIEW

FACT SHEET No. 15

Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

VOCATIONAL EDUCATION IN RURAL AMERICA

What is rural America really like? Do most rural Americans live on farms? What is the quality of life for rural Americans? What special needs do rural Americans have that can be met through vocational education? Vocational education instructors, administrators, and policymakers need an accurate understanding of rural America to plan and provide quality programs for rural youth and adults.

A Portrait of Rural America: Conditions Affecting Vocational Education Policy by Stuart Rosenfeld (Vocational Education Study Publication No. 6, National Institute of Education) gives information on rural schools, people, and labor markets that can help vocational educators better understand the needs of rural Americans.

THE RURAL PEOPLE

Rural Americans comprise about one-quarter of the nation's population. These rural Americans live on farms, in the open countryside, or in non-metropolitan areas with populations of less than ten thousand people. Prior to the 1970s, the trend was for the population to move from the rural areas to the metropolitan areas. For the first time since the 1800s, the 1970s showed a trend toward a higher rate of growth in rural areas. When compared to metropolitan areas, people in rural America tend to be older. Also, fewer rural Americans have completed high school; thus educational levels are lower. The final important trend is that decreasing numbers of rural Americans are living on farms. In 1979, only one of every nine rural Americans lived on a farm.

POVERTY IN RURAL AMERICA

Poverty is a problem in rural areas. The rural poor tend to be neglected. This is because poverty is somewhat different in rural areas and often the rural poor do not qualify for poverty assistance programs. One reason for this is that the rural poor are more apt to be employed. Another factor is that more families in rural areas are apt to be intact. Seventy percent of rural poor families in the United States are headed by a male as compared to thirty-three percent of the urban poor families.

RURAL JOBS AND WORK

Work opportunities are limited in rural areas. Usually job opportunities within a specific area are limited to one or two industries that require low-skill, low-paid workers. Fewer, only 9 percent, rural Americans are directly employed in farming. However, there is a wide range of agriculture-related occupations available to rural Americans. A typical pattern is for an individual to be self-employed or to have two jobs. In general, rural Americans tend to be underemployed and to be working at lower wages. An important trend is toward the industrialization of rural areas. Many states are using economic development strategies that attract labor-intensive industries to rural areas. This reindustrialization is creating more jobs. However, since many of these are low-skill jobs, rural industrialization does not always improve the income level of rural Americans.

RURAL SCHOOLS

When compared to urban schools parents in rural areas are more satisfied with their rural schools. However, rural schools do have unique problems. These school districts tend to be smaller than metropolitan districts and to spend less money per pupil. Smaller size and limited financial resources make it more difficult to provide programs and services. This means that fewer rural schools provide a wide range of curriculum offerings. Also, it means that rural schools are less apt to have special services available to students.

IMPLICATIONS FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

This composite picture of rural America has implications for vocational education programming. Some important needs that are suggested by this information include the following:

- The basic skill level of rural students tends to be lower than other areas of the country. This means that vocational education needs to strengthen basic skills education through vocational education programs.
- Although the number of jobs on farms is declining, there are a variety of occupations related to agribusiness industries. Curriculum needs to be developed for occupations related to feed products, farm equipment, food processing, paper products, and marketing.
- New industries are being attracted to rural areas. Vocational education can support economic development through cooperation with new industries in the development of training programs. This involvement in economic development is becoming a major trend in vocational education.
- Many rural Americans are self-employed. This means that recent programs that have been developed to teach entrepreneur skills will be highly relevant for the rural population. Vocational education programs should review these materials and incorporate entrepreneurial courses in their curriculum.
- Because of the small size and limited resources of the rural school, it is difficult to provide varied course offerings.

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One solution to this is consolidation for the purpose of vocational education. Many districts have already moved in this direction. In the future, consolidation to provide more cost-effective and varied curriculum will become increasingly important.

- Because of limited resources, it is more difficult for rural schools to provide special services. One service that is important is career guidance. Since many rural Americans are underemployed, it is crucial to have career counseling assistance that will help individuals both in and out of school develop plans for career upgrading.
- Parents have enormous influence on the career choices of their children. Families have particularly strong influence in rural areas where larger numbers of families are intact and where parents have pride in their local schools. Vocational educators need to work with parents to help them understand the need for new curriculum areas. Their support will be important to providing vocational education programs that will result in increased economic benefits for participants.
- Rural areas have a strong need for postsecondary and adult vocational education programs. Since many rural Americans are underemployed or need to develop new skills for employment in new industries, there is an ongoing need for skill upgrading and career change. Vocational education programs at all levels need to work cooperatively to develop plans for providing this needed training for the adult population.

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